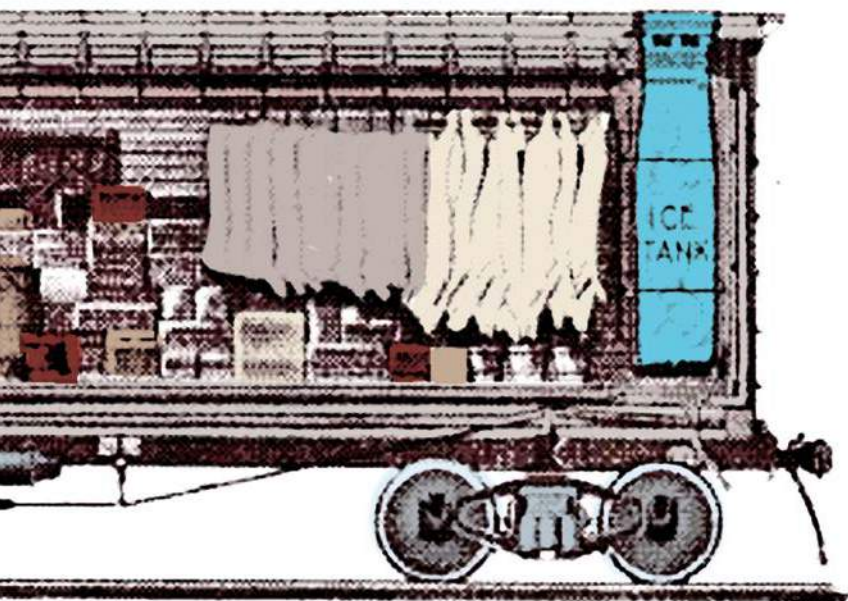
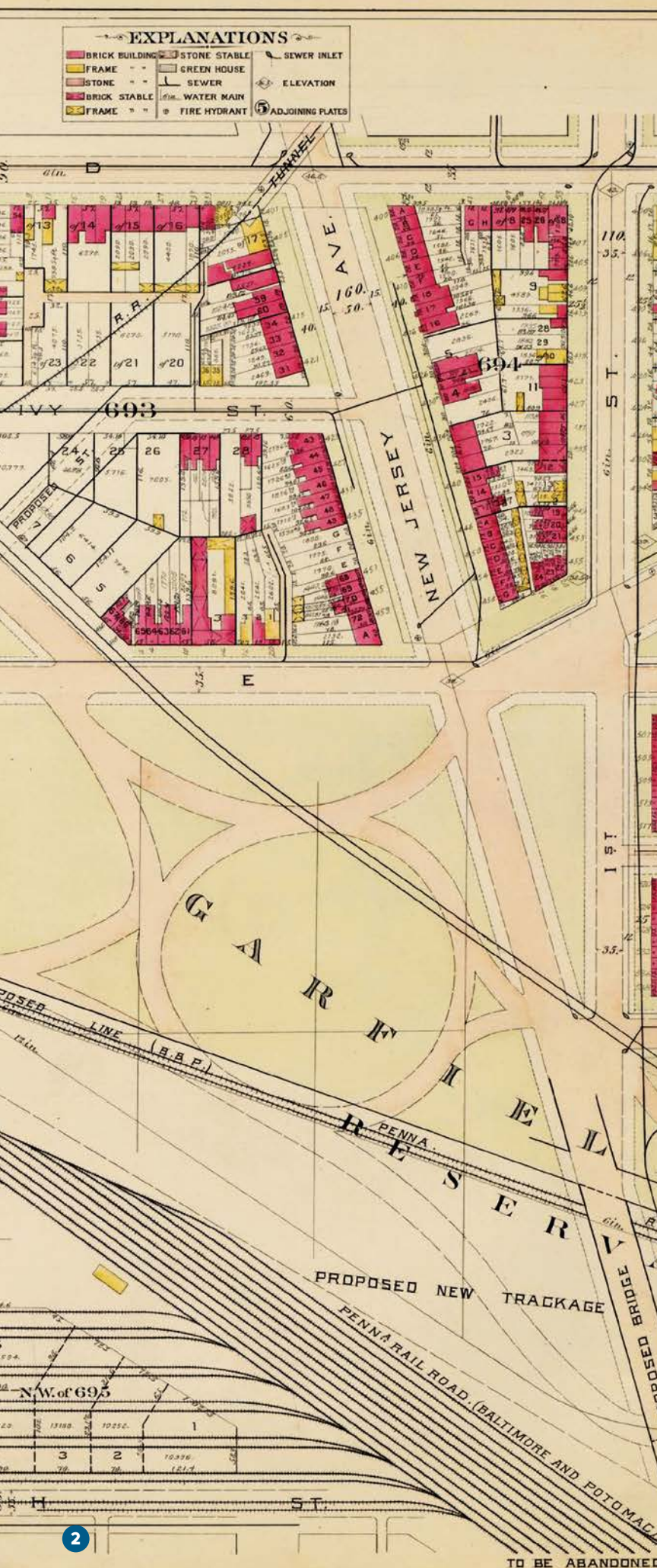




# HOW THE RAILROAD CHANGED FOOD & DIET IN WASHINGTON DC







**If we are what we eat, Americans must have experienced a major body remake during the century after the nation's capital opened for business in 1800.** What they ate,

where they got it, and how they prepared it changed dramatically as the years unfolded. New foods appeared, edibles once grown locally began showing up from faraway places, seasonal treats became year-round options. Food and drink once laboriously prepared at home became available in packages or bottles from the local market.

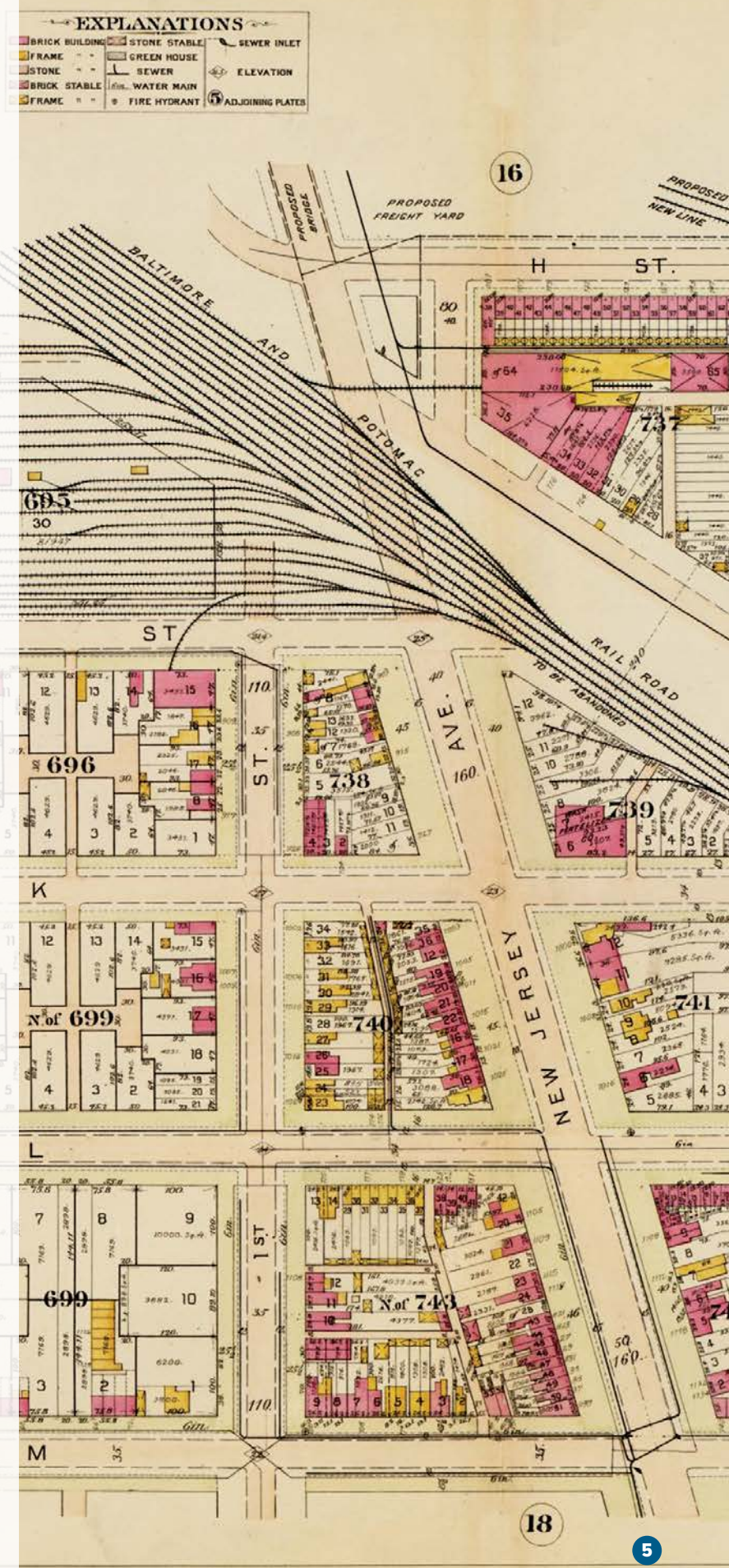
In barely a century the local and limited menu of the Colonial American kitchen had traveled into the modern era. Increasingly it made the journey in railroad boxcars. Between 1825 and 1915, the United States went from having zero miles of railroad track to having 254,000 miles, as much as the rest of the world combined. Railroads tied together a national transport web of rivers, canals, roads, and coastal waters. They also provided a far faster and cheaper method of transporting every imaginable kind of product, from cast iron stoves to crates of oranges and kegs of beer.

Washington, DC, as the nation's capital, might have led this food revolution, and in fact one of the first American cookbooks was published here in 1824. That was the



exception, however, and the District remained a culinary backwater compared with its big sisters up north. Partly that came from mindset, the District being notoriously a provincial Southern town through the antebellum years. Partly also it came from the limitations of its transportation infrastructure. In Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, government and private initiatives were investing in the construction of railroads as vital connectors of the transport network, but Washington had no comparable vision and staked its future heavily on the C&O Canal and the Potomac River.

Poorly connected with the emerging national railroad net, Washingtonians risked becoming isolated from the riches of the booming American economy and its food cornucopia. Such deprivation was unacceptable once the nation began to fulfill its manifest destiny after the Civil War. A capital worthy of the nation would need to exchange its traditional edibles and diet for the emerging culture of factory food produced in superabundance. The question was simply when and how. The answer emerged quickly after the war, driven by the District's growing size and affluence and by the ambitions of the railroads themselves.







WIKIMEDIA

## Food in Old Washington

**WHEN THE DISTRICT BECAME** a functioning capital in 1800, its residents had food options hardly different from those of their colonial-era forebears. Life moved at the speed of horses and the wind, and food could travel no faster from grower to consumer. The new national capital, connected to the world with a few bad roads and the Potomac River, was an overgrown village dotted with fields and farms and lacking an adequate food infrastructure of grocery stores, wholesalers, and public markets. Old-timers like Col. James A. Tait of



**A Distinguished Resident and Author in the New Capital**  
Margaret Bayard Smith, painting by Charles Bird King, ca. 1829.

Capitol Hill could recall life in the 1830s, when “South Washington, or what was formerly known as the Island, was in those days a succession of wheat and

corn fields, and swamps... Sometimes a whole square would be taken up by a peach or apple orchard.” Washingtonians typically drove to Georgetown to buy flour, potatoes (from Maine), and other foodstuffs.

Into this bucolic domain of a few thousand souls came Margaret Bayard Smith (1778-1844) and her husband, journalist Samuel Harrison Smith, founder of the city’s first newspaper, the *National Intelligencer*. They arrived from Philadelphia in 1800, even earlier than the Colonel’s memory could reach. Margaret, whose circle of friends included Thomas Jefferson, chronicled her decades-long life in the District in innumerable letters to relatives and friends. Missives dating from her first decade in the city suggest that food was not something taken for granted. Soon after settling in Washington, for example, she began visiting neighbors in an unspecified area that probably lay near

**Margaret Smith’s Washington, 1833**  
“City of Washington from Beyond the Navy Yard,” by George Cooke, 1833. The view, from the south side of the Anacostia River, shows the Navy Yard, Capitol, and White House as defining features. Fields and empty land cover most of Buzzard Point and environs in the middle left.

INSET: REDWOOD LIBRARY AND ATHENAEUM. IMAGE BY NEW-YORK HISTORICAL



the Navy Yard. A Mrs. Bell returned the visit, in mid-November 1800, bringing suitable gifts: a basket of sweet potatoes and cabbages. On another occasion Margaret and Mrs. Tingey, wife of the superintendent of the Navy Yard, went shopping in Georgetown and then stopped at Mrs. Bell's on the way back. The hostess treated them to lunch and then gave Margaret some cake, apples, a bottle of milk, and a bottle of yeast. She also gave her a bundle of hops. Evidently Mrs. Bell brewed beer and assumed her friend did too.

Washingtonians in Margaret Smith's day ate many of the foods that were available in later decades. Beef, pork,

lamb, and veal figured high among meats, while fish and poultry included shad, rock, catfish, chicken, turkey, ducks, and pigeon. Finding the food could be a challenge, however, as a British diplomat discovered during

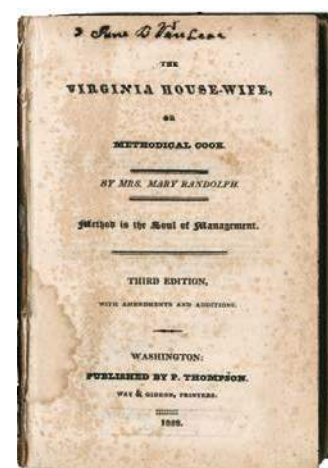
his posting from 1822 to 1825. Henry Unwin Addington wrote that in 1822 the local market was ill-supplied with fresh meat, vegetables, and fruit during the summer. As testimony to the justice of his complaint, he cited an exchange with his cook, whom he had sent to market to buy food for dinner. "The market was very poor today, sir," explained the cook, who could find only some stale catfish, a little poor-looking veal, and no beef at all. "What the deuce have you got then?" demanded Addington. A forequarter of lamb and two small chickens was the reply. And for vegetables? "I have got some potatoes, sir, and a few beans, and an eggplant. There was nothing else. And I have bought a muskmelon and a few peaches."

## Kitchen Labor

ONCE GOTTEN, THE FOOD had to be prepared, and here too the DC homemaker faced challenges. Preparation required an enormous amount of work by later standards. This can be seen from the many recipes for preserving foods offered by Mary Randolph (1762-1828), who ran an upscale boardinghouse in the District in the 1820s and wrote the nation's first regional cookbook, *The Virginia Housewife or Methodical Cook*, published in 1824 in the District and enjoying many reprints.

Randolph's recipe for curing beef, to cite only one, advises the homemaker to prepare the brine in mid-October, in the following manner. Get a 30-gallon cask, remove one head and fill it with a pound of saltpeter, 15 quarts of salt, and 15 gallons of cold water. This would produce enough brine to cure "all the beef which a private family can use in the course of a winter." Even assuming the servants did the heavy lifting, it meant a large investment of household labor, but there was more. To salt the beef, saw a molasses hogshead in half to provide a tub for laying out the beef after it has been rubbed with fine Liverpool salt. After removing it 10 days later, put it in the brine and leave it for about 10 days more, when it will be fit to eat.

The housewife could not be squeamish about blood and guts, as is evident from the cookbook's advice on how to make black puddings: "Catch the blood as it runs from the hog, stir it continually till cold to prevent its coagulating ..." And she needed a surgeon's steady hand and anatomical knowledge when cutting up organs. To make calf's heart, "a nice dish ... take the heart and liver from the harslet [organs], and cut



**DC's Cookbook, 1824**  
The first regional cookbook written in the United States. This is the title page of the third edition.



**Fine Groceries in 1860** Advertisement by King & Burchell, an upscale grocer in Washington that sold a variety of food items from the US and abroad.



HOW STUFF WORKS

**The Ubiquitous Barrel** Cheap to make, sturdy, and easy to move and stack, the wooden barrel could hold almost any food product. Newspaper accounts in the District mention barrels as containers of meat, fish, fruit, vegetables, flour, vinegar, cider, wine, and even eggs. The casks in the photo are recreations of Civil War-era barrels.

off the windpipe, boil the lights [lungs] very tender, and cut them in small pieces." After making a gravy, cut the ventricle out of the heart, wash it, coat it with lard, fill the cavity with stuffing, put it in a pan and bake it.

References from Margaret Smith's letters describe a domestic situation compatible with that presumed in Randolph's cookbook. In a letter of Jan. 23, 1804, Margaret explained that she had begun baking her own bread and breakfast rolls, in addition to preparing the main meal of the day. "I cook every dinner that is eat by the family and have even to assist in dishing up dinner." That meal typically consisted of one dish of meat, two of vegetables, and soup. She knew how to salt beef and seems to have done it often.

Some of the food eaten in Margaret's household was grown at Sidney, a 200-acre country getaway located on today's Catholic University campus. A local man managed the actual farming, which produced melons and other vegetables. Cows provided milk for home consumption and for butter-making, a skill that Margaret practiced to her great pride. In a letter of July 31, 1806, she described the visit of lady friends, who praised the quality of her butter, which they presumed had been made, that is, churned, by one of her servants. No, replied Margaret, "it was my own making and that since the first of May I had never missed churning but once... I have made about 60 lbs. this summer and have packed nearly 30 away."

Margaret and her household had company as city farmers. Many local establishments, from hotels to public facilities, as well as individual residents, kept gardens and livestock and poultry, even as late as the turn of the century. In 1853 Willard's Hotel owned 15 cows and a bull, which it advertised for auction when it undertook a major remodeling. Its farm appeared again in January 1859,

when the *Evening Star* asked, "Where Do the Supplies Come From?" It noted that "three or four of the leading hotel proprietors have their own market farms and gardens in the neighborhood of the city, from whence they draw supplies, and where stock is kept to be killed as needed for the table. The Willard's have a farm north of Twentieth street, where they have at the present time several hundred turkeys, pigs, &c."

Many residents raised livestock and poultry or kept cows for milk. If an animal wandered away or was stolen, the owner might place an advertisement in a newspaper's lost and found column; or a resident who found one of these animals might place the ad. On July 26, 1866, the *Evening Star* offered an especially full array of errant livestock: a pregnant sow found by John Mason at Jackson Street between North Capitol and 1st Street; a cow lost by Mrs. Paul at 6½ Street SW; a lost cow of William McBride's at No. 88, corner of 13½ and O Streets SW; a lost brindle cow belonging to John Stoddard, 34th Street between I and K; and a strayed spotted cow belonging to C. Miller near the Congressional Cemetery.

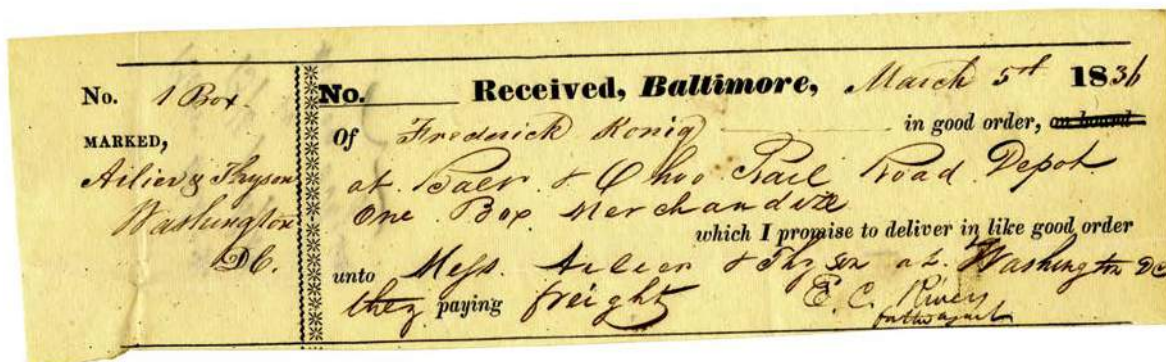
## Factory Food

**CHANGE WAS ALREADY HAPPENING,** however. By the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, homemade foods and those produced by individual farmers and other food artisans were sharing the kitchen with manufactured products. The change began in upstate New York with the advent of the first cheese factory in 1851 and the first butter factory a few years later. Under this new arrangement, the farmers would sell their milk to a single central processor, which would make the cheese or butter and sell it under the processor's name. This method was so successful in producing a high-quality

PINTEREST



**The Wooden Box** Boxes, like barrels, were common packaging devices for all kinds of products, from beer to fruit. Senate beer was a product of the Heurich Brewery, a mainstay of DC beer drinkers during the latter part of the 19th century and into the 20th.



COURTESY OF THE B&O RAILROAD MUSEUM

product at low cost that it spread rapidly throughout the nation. Washingtonians of means could benefit from this innovation by visiting T.H. Evans & Co., a grocer at 532 Pennsylvania Avenue, who on Feb. 17, 1855, announced the arrival of 800 pounds of butter, “a very superior article,” from the dairy farms of Goshen, N.Y.

Meanwhile, a similar process was changing the raising and processing of meat. Farmers in the Midwest discovered they could produce hogs and cattle far beyond local needs, so they began selling their animals to large slaughterhouses in nearby towns, which then sold the barrels of salted meat to dealers in Eastern cities. By the 1840s, Cincinnati claimed the title of largest pork-packer in the nation and called itself Porkopolis. Farmers were also starting to ship livestock east, where dealers were erecting huge slaughterhouses on the outskirts of cities including New York and Baltimore.

Yet another factory system was beginning to appear based on the preservation of food in glass or metal containers. Canning became commercially viable early in the 19th century, but was expensive and appealed mainly to the military, travelers, and others who needed to carry their food with them. Canned foods helped feed General Grant’s armies during the early 1860s, and also the workers who built the transcontinental railroad only a few years later. After improved industrial technology lowered the cost and raised the production rate of bottles and cans, during the 1860s, foods preserved this way experienced an explosion of supply and demand. In 1867, the residents of Denver, Colorado,

could buy Chesapeake Bay oysters (at 70 cents a can), and in 1871 District residents could buy canned Pacific salmon.

## Steam and Food

**HOWEVER, MOVING THE FACTORY** food from producer to consumer could be a challenge, especially once products like New York cheese or Delaware peaches gained regional and then national reputations. Railroads were, in theory, the fastest means of transport, but relatively expensive, so most producers chose water transport, especially steamboats. By the time Margaret Smith and her husband sold their country place in 1835, many residents of East Coast cities were eating grains and meats shipped down the Ohio River, or through the Great Lakes via the Erie Canal, from as far away as Indiana or Ohio. Washington’s wholesalers and grocers could now provide an impressive array of goods and produce grown in Maryland and Virginia or imported from other regions or even abroad. Local growers in the Washington area remained important, nevertheless, because they had the advantage of proximity and could literally drive their carts and animals to the city’s markets, especially in the winter when fresh food was hardest to get and sold for the highest price. In early December 1857, for example, during a stretch of good weather, Virginia farmers drove an estimated 500 head of cattle over the Long Bridge, headed to the Baltimore market, and 300 wagons loaded with corn, wheat, pork and other items destined for Washington’s markets.

**Railway Express Receipt, 1836** The Washington Branch Line of the B&O Railroad opened in 1835 and carried mostly passengers with some light freight. On this receipt dated March 5, 1836, Frederick Konig declares that he received a package, at the Baltimore & Ohio depot in Baltimore, which he will deliver to Ailier & Thysen, a recipient in Washington, DC. The recipient paid the express charges.



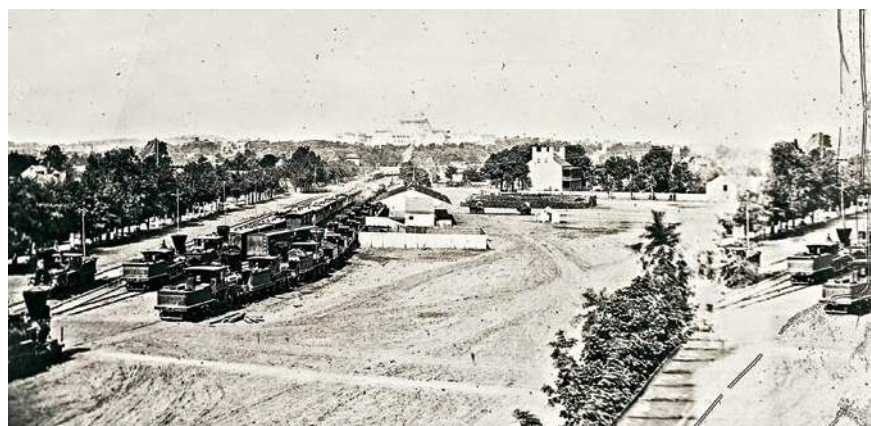
## The Railroad Comes to Washington

**STEAMBOATS WERE THE FASTEST** kind of water transport and were used for carrying people and high-value or perishable cargoes. Transport by sailing vessel was cost-effective for bulk cargoes like grain, flour, and potatoes but relied on favorable winds. During Thanksgiving week in 1849 the lack of wind prevented vessels from reaching Georgetown, the District's flour emporium. Winds did not affect the railroads, which were beginning to appear in the food chain.

Washington became one of the first major cities to have a railroad, in 1835, when the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad opened a line connecting the District with Baltimore and points north. The B&O established a small passenger depot off the Mall in a converted residence, then opened a larger terminal at New Jersey Avenue and C Street NE in 1852. The railroad saw the branch as a lucrative side business to its real goal, to connect Baltimore with the rapidly developing Midwest. Nevertheless, the Washington Branch became popular among travelers and shippers alike. Most of the line's revenues came from passenger fares, and railroad transport

**Maryland Avenue Railroad Tracks, 1863** View looking west from the top of the Capitol. The broad street at the extreme left is Maryland Avenue, which was also the right-of-way for tracks of the Alexandria & Washington Railroad, a local line that offered service between Washington and Virginia. The right-of-way was later acquired by the B&P Railroad, which brought through rail service to Southeast and Southwest DC in 1872.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORD ADMINISTRATION

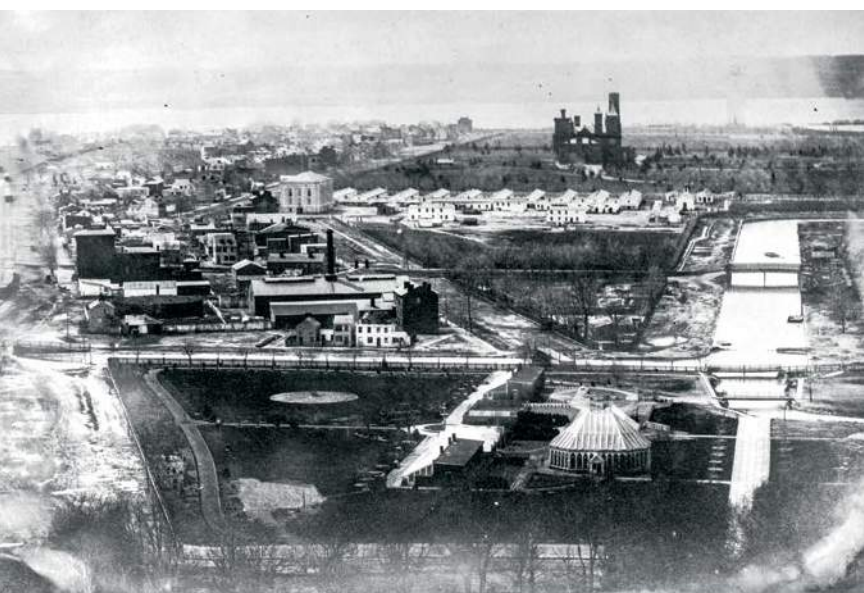


of foodstuffs appears only occasionally in grocers' ads during the next twenty years, and then for high-end goods. On Feb. 17, 1855, for example, the *Evening Star* carried an ad by grocer George W.E. Kennedy announcing the arrival from New York, "per railroad," of barrels of clarified champagne cider, for sale on draft at 50 cents a gallon.

For nearly 40 years the Washington Branch, a single track (until 1863) was the District's main rail connection with the world. Elsewhere in the nation, a railroad-building mania had set in, with some 20,000 miles of new lines in the 1850s. The cost of rail transport dropped sharply, and the growing interconnectedness of the lines meant shorter travel times. It was now evident that the railroad was becoming the dominant mode of commercial and industrial shipping. Local business interests in Georgetown and Montgomery County tried to gain better rail service, but the B&O declined to build a direct rail connection to the west. The local interests chartered their own company, the Metropolitan Railroad, and began surveying a route. Farmers saw so much advantage to being near a railroad that in 1854 one real estate ad for a farm on Rockville Pike, four and a half miles from Georgetown, carefully noted that the property was only half a mile from the proposed route of the new line. The purchasers of that farm would have to wait almost 20 years to hear the

**Maryland Avenue Tracks, 1863** Looking northeast, up Maryland Avenue, toward the Capitol. The tracks were originally laid by the Alexandria & Washington Railroad in the mid-1850s and re-laid, to standard gauge, by the military railway administration during the Civil War. The photographer stood near the Long Bridge, on the Potomac shore, where the B&P Railroad later maintained extensive yards.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS







LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

**Washington's Rail Net, ca. 1900** Detail from Norris Peters map of Washington, DC, 1905. Above the Mall the B&O's tracks began at the passenger terminal near the Capitol and ran north before dividing, one branch going to Baltimore and the other to the west. South of the Mall the Baltimore & Potomac's tracks ran along Virginia and Maryland avenues. The B&P operated a railyard and maintenance facility opposite Garfield Park in SE and freight depots in SW. The city's main public market, Centre Market, was just north of the Mall.

train whistle's toot, however, because the Metropolitan Railroad was unable to raise funds for construction, and the advent of war in 1861 ended the effort.

## War and Reassessment

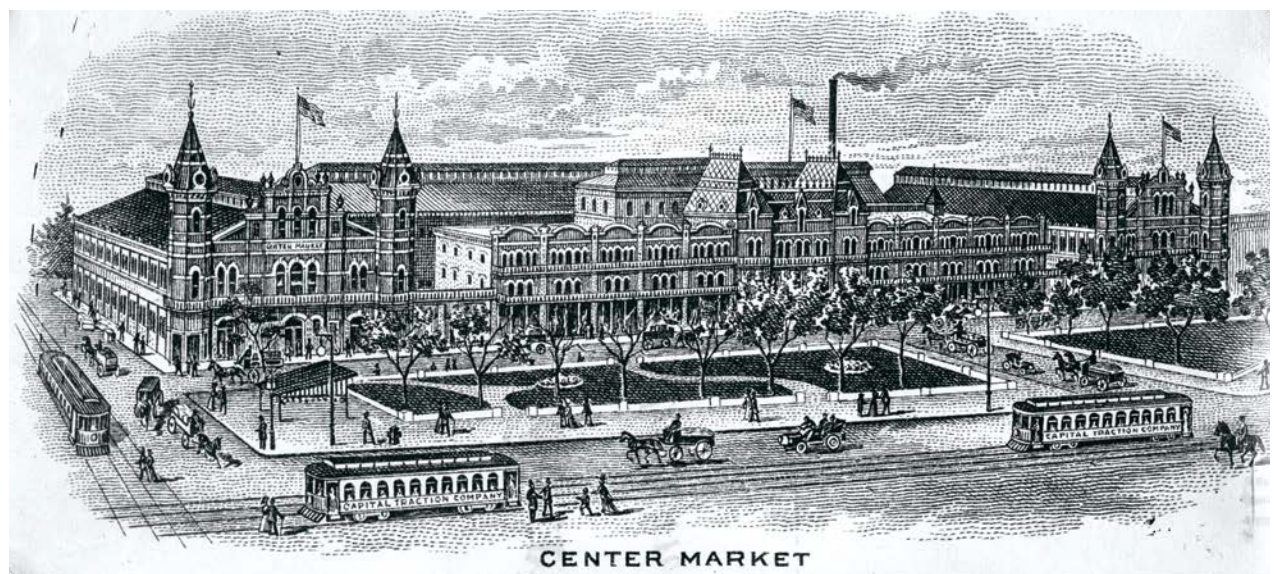
**AFTER THE WAR, WASHINGTON'S** leaders began strenuously to encourage improved rail connection to the north and the establishment of good connections with the west and south. The Civil War had brought a demographic and cultural invasion of the District as it received hundreds of thousands of transients and new residents from all over the nation. Population more than

doubled between 1850 and 1870 to nearly 132,000, and with growth came new wealth, perspectives, tastes, and agendas. War had also demonstrated the power and effectiveness of railroads, especially when used as interconnected systems. Equally important, at least to the railroads, was the District's location, which made it a logical pivot point in the transport system of the Atlantic seaboard. The South was expected to enjoy an economic rebound after the Civil War, led less by cotton than by fruit and produce, and that placed Washington at a critical node for those railroads that thought in regional and national terms.

The B&O acquired the charter of the Metropolitan Railroad and built the line that the Montgomery County and Georgetown interests had begun, running it not to Georgetown but south into the heart of the District, on a route along the east of North Capitol Street. Service began in 1873 and gave the long-sought direct access to the west.

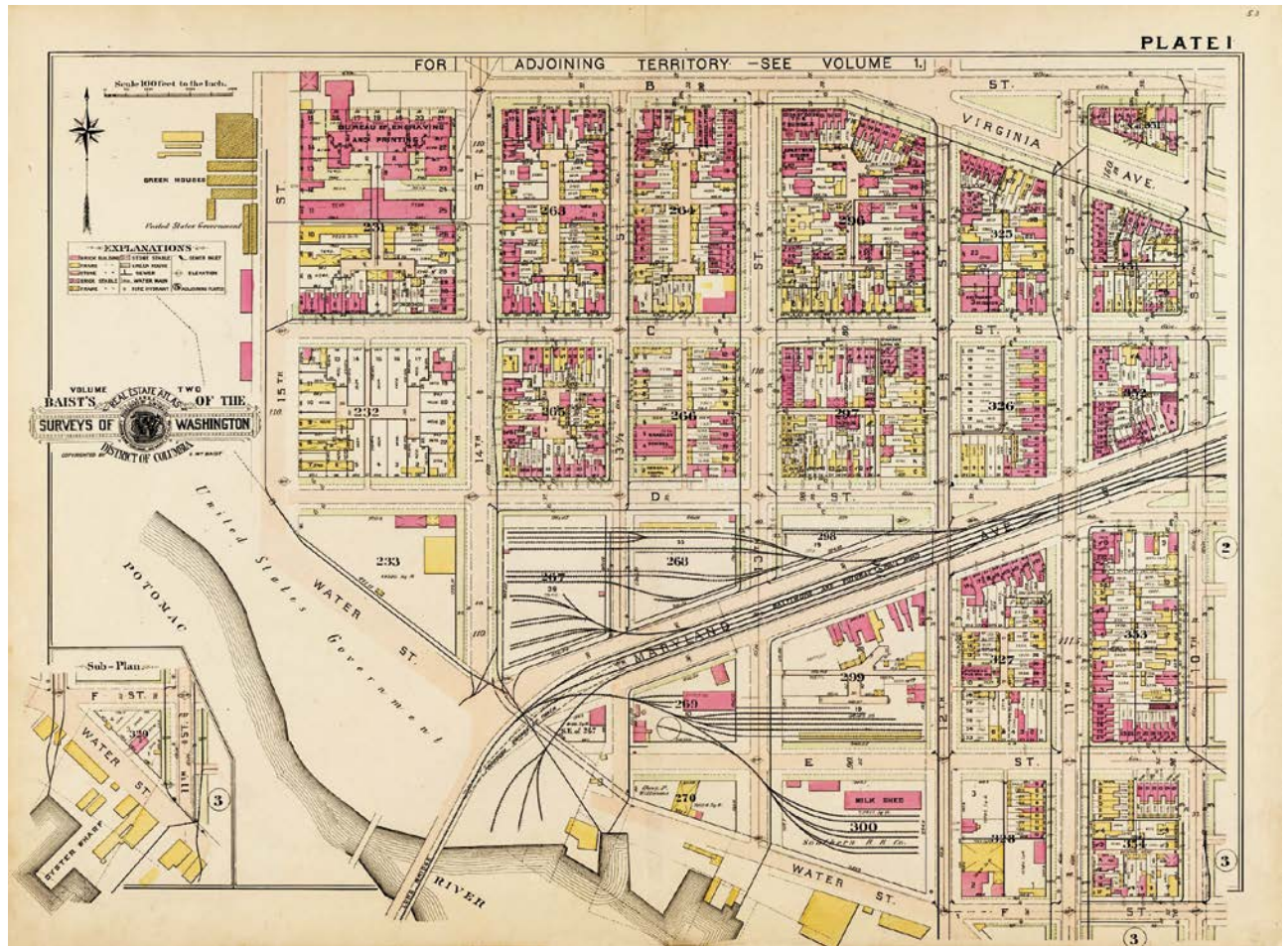
Meanwhile, the B&O was feeling competitive pressure from the Pennsylvania Railroad, based in Philadelphia. The Pennsy, as it was often known, was one of the four big-time railroad companies in the East, alongside the Erie, New York Central, and B&O, and like them

**Centre Market, ca. 1910** Large public markets like this became urban hallmarks, but during the early 20th century changes in food distribution made them largely unnecessary and most of them, including this one, were demolished.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS





it had ambitions to provide service not only to the Midwest but along the Atlantic seaboard. The Pennsy's managers were able to enlarge their seaboard presence after the Civil War when they began offering passenger service to the District and to the South, but they had to use the tracks of the B&O's Washington Branch, and the B&O was a reluctant partner.

The Pennsy began exploring other options, both for gaining its own access

to DC and for extending service south of the Potomac. The big break came when management in Philadelphia learned of a charter granted by the Maryland legislature in 1853 to organizers of the Baltimore & Potomac Railroad. The organizers simply wanted to build a rail line between Baltimore and an agricultural area on the lower Potomac at Popes Creek, but the Pennsylvania's managers, when they read the charter,

**The Southwest Waterfront Rail Net, 1903** Detail from map showing tracks on each side of the B&P's main line along Maryland Avenue.

**Outdoor Market, 1889** Two views of an unidentified outdoor market in DC.





saw that a clause permitted the company to build branches of as much as 20 miles in length, enough to reach the District. The managers arranged to gain control of the company and feed it the money to finish the B&P, with a branch line to DC. Completion of the line to DC and across the Potomac in 1872 gave the Pennsy all the access it needed to the District and points south.

## Full Connection, at Last

**THE DISTRICT NOW BOASTED** two separate rail nets, one north of the Mall and one south. The B&O net had a large yard near the intersection of Delaware and Massachusetts avenues served by two lines of track, one running north to Baltimore and the other heading north and then west.

The B&P line brought trains through Maryland and across the Anacostia River into the District. Today's CSX tunnel on Virginia Avenue was created as part of

the route into DC. After leaving the tunnel, tracks went up Virginia Avenue, past a large railyard and engine house opposite Garfield Park, to the intersection with Maryland Avenue. There the B&P built transfer facilities in Square 386, on D Street, and Square 493 on C Street. A spur went north to a passenger terminal on Avenue B (now Constitution) and Sixth Street, across the Mall. The main line, after it left the junction of Virginia and Maryland avenues, bent south to run along Maryland Avenue and down to the Long Bridge, where it crossed the Potomac to Virginia.

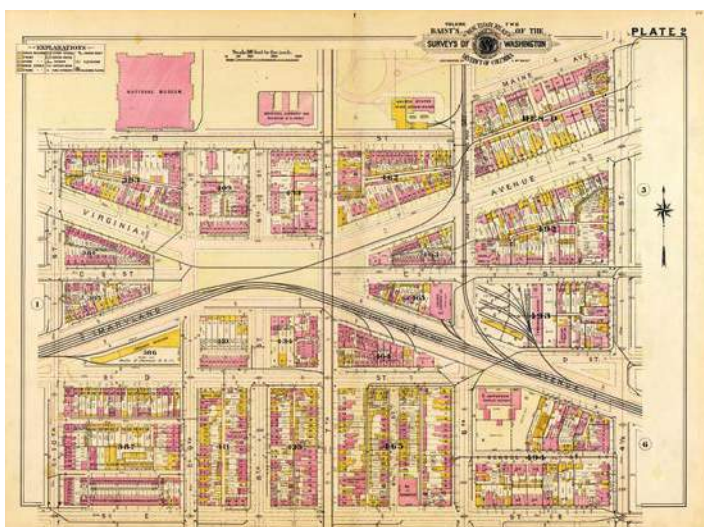
Railroads quickly put their stamp on many of Washington's neighborhoods. The carriers had laid their tracks in the least expensive manner possible, at grade level, where they interfaced with pedestrians, horse cars, wagons, and wandering livestock and poultry. The presence of two railyards in Southwest and a very large one at Garfield Park transformed residential streets into

**B&P Freight Yard in SW, 1901** At the yard, goods shipped to the city were unloaded for distribution to local markets and businesses.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS







LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

**Two B&P Railroad Yards in SW, 1903**  
Detail showing two B&P railyards in Southwest, one in Square 386 and the other in 493.

scenes of commercial activity as gangs of men unloaded freight cars carrying goods ranging from sugar and grain to furniture and machinery. Tracks running down the streets became impromptu loading zones, to the annoyance of residents. Walking, riding, or driving became risky activities on many streets. During succeeding decades, complaints by residents near the tracks and railyards filled the local newspapers. In 1887 a grand jury even indicted the B&P as a public nuisance owing to its laying of tracks and its freight handling on Maryland Avenue SW. Eventually Congress mandated that the railroads remove their tracks from ground level; consolidate operations to reduce the number of locomotives and cars in residential neighborhoods; and place all

**B&P Railroad Freight Yard in SW in 1901**  
The yard in Square 386 was a triangular plot between Maryland Avenue and D Street and 9th and 10th streets SW.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

**WASHINGTON**  
**Fast Freight Line,**  
Via Baltimore and Potomac R. R.,  
CALLS FOR AND DELIVERS GOODS OF ALL DESCRIPTIONS IN  
*Baltimore, Washington, Georgetown and Alexandria.*  
**GEIGAN & CO., Agents.**  
OFFICE, CORNER BALTIMORE AND NORTH STREETS, BALTIMORE, MD.  
**GEORGE W. KNOX, Agent.**  
**ELPHONZO YOUNGS, Manager.**  
OFFICE, 603 PENNSYLVANIA AVE., WASHINGTON, D. C.

**A. S. CHAMBERLIN & CO.**  
WHOLESALE AND RETAIL DEALERS IN  
**GROCERIES, WINES, LIQUORS, SEGARS, ETC.**  
*New York State Butter, Eggs and Cheese,*  
*Cor. Pa. Avenue and Eighteenth Street, Washington, D. C.*

passenger service in one depot, Union Station, which opened in 1907.

The advent of the Washington rail nets coincided with the rise of large-scale national food brands that relied on speedy and cheap transportation. Most of the classic names in American food, like Armour, Heinz, and Schlitz, were founded in the 1860s and 1870s. Railroads found that their freight traffic, much of it in foodstuffs, was now far more important than it had been in earlier decades. Before the Civil War three-fourths of the B&O traffic revenue for the District was for passenger service and only one-fourth for freight. As the ratio began to even out and then reverse after the war, the B&O constructed spurs to service manufacturing and warehouse firms on its route. Likewise the B&P tracks on Virginia Avenue had sidings to serve warehouses and other

**Advertisement for Express Freight Service on the B&P Railroad, 1877.** *Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia, 1877.*

**Advertisement for Factory-Made Butter and Cheese in DC, 1867.** *Boyd's Directory of Washington & Georgetown, 1867.*

**Pedestrian Crossing at D and 10th Streets SW, ca. 1904** The freight yard in Square 386, amid residential neighborhoods. A crossing gate provided protection against oncoming trains.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS





LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

**The Garfield Park Yard, ca. 1901** Aerial view looking south to southwest from old Providence Hospital, across E Street, Duddington Place, and F Street between 1st and 2nd streets SE. Beyond the dwellings in the foreground lie the B&P's railyard and maintenance facility. The yard contributed to the smoke that obscures the view toward the river.

private customers, including two local breweries in Southwest, a Schlitz beer warehouse and a grain and feed company in Southeast, and, near the Long Bridge, an extensive yard of sidings for making up trains and for servicing lumber yards, a milk shed, and other waterfront businesses.

## More Food Options

**THE RAIL NETS GAVE** Washingtonians more food options than they had ever enjoyed. Washingtonians in the 19th century could eat locally grown celery, at least during the warm months, much of it raised on Buzzard Point in Southwest, but by 1900 most of the farms were gone. The celery remained, however, provided year-round by growers as far away as Florida and Michigan. Wholesalers began shipping foods by rail in bulk. A DC grocer in February 1875 announced the arrival of a ton of Turkish prunes, as well as “a full car load of choice New York State apples.”

The advent of cheap and accessible rail transport had important

consequences for the city's carnivores.

The housewife of 1830 expected that the fresh pork she bought from the local butcher had come to town on its own legs, herded to the urban slaughterhouse by drovers, a practice that usually made the meat lean and in need of long cooking. By the end of the century hogs, sheep, and steers were carried by rail to processing centers in places like Cincinnati and Chicago, which sent their fresh meat throughout the nation.

Ohio River steamboats and drovers had been shipping Midwest livestock to the East Coast since the 1830s, but railroads could do it faster. When the B&P Railroad began operations in Southwest in 1872, it built cattle pens at one of its facilities in Southwest, probably the yard in Square 493. A city butcher was quoted in 1875 as claiming that “all the cattle slaughtered in this District are brought over this railroad.” That is an exaggeration, because newspaper reports show that city butchers were also purchasing livestock weekly at markets such as Drover's Rest, located in upper Georgetown at 4759 Reservoir Road



**The Garfield Park Yard, 1903** Details from two maps showing the B&P's yard in Southeast. The maps, as published, do not quite align but nevertheless give a sense of the scale of the yard and the way it bifurcated this sector of Capitol Hill. Providence Hospital, in the upper right of the top map, was the vantage point for the previous photo. The Dent School was located on South Carolina Avenue and 2nd Street, a short walk from the tracks, all of which were at street level.

NW, far from the railroad. Nevertheless, that such a claim could be presented credibly, only three years after the B&P began service to DC, suggests how quickly and substantially the railroad was altering the trade in live animals. Drover's Rest closed ca. 1891, replaced in part by the Queenstown livestock market, located near the Metropolitan Branch Line west of Silver Spring.

The city's butchers still had to transport their livestock from the railyard to the slaughtering places, which were scattered on the periphery from Rock Creek to the Anacostia River, and this unfortunately meant driving animals through public streets. The real solution to the driving problem was to stop sending live animals for slaughter in cities.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



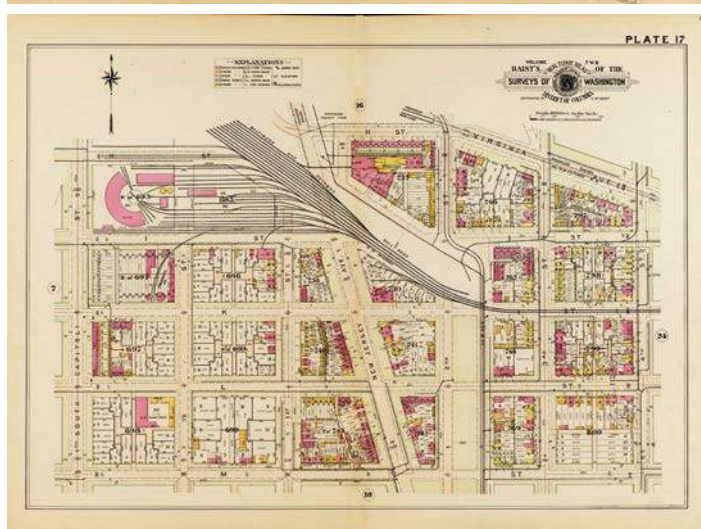
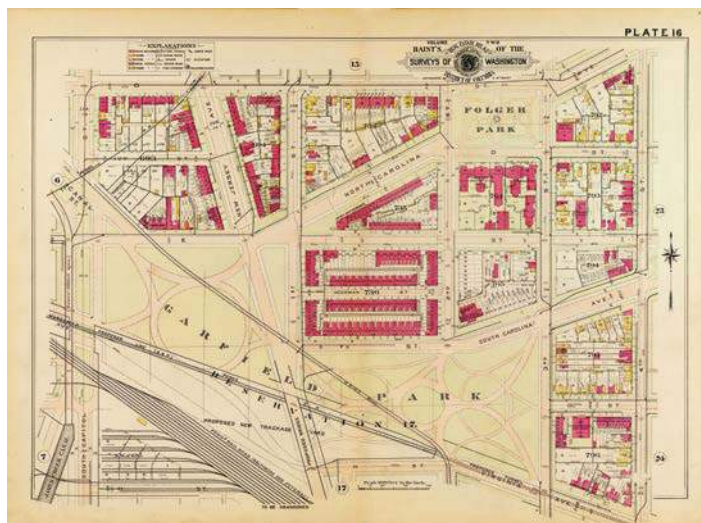
That became not only practical but preferable by the 1880s with the advent of large numbers of refrigerated railroad boxcars. The cessation of the live animal trade meant that Washington could dispense with driving and even with having slaughterhouses within city limits.

**Watermelon Season in Laurel, Delaware, 1905** Loading cars of the Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington Railroad. The PB&W was formed in 1902 when the Pennsylvania Railroad merged the B&P with another of its subsidiaries.

## A National Food Web

**THE RAILROAD-DRIVEN FOOD REVOLUTION** did not end with meat. In the same year as the city's butchers were pleading for a resolution to the driving issue, the grocers were touting the wonderful citrus fruits they were receiving from two new sources. "California oranges, very handsome and sweet," ran an ad by N.W. Burchell, 1332 V Street, in January 1875, during the middle of winter, when fruit traditionally came from Spain and Sicily. An item in a February 1875 issue of the *Evening Star* declared, "Judging from the fine specimens of Florida oranges received from the Malaga Fruit Company, 408 9th Street, the late crop in that state must have been a superb one." In the same issue, grocer G.G. Cornwell & Sons at 1418 Pennsylvania Avenue, opposite Willard's Hotel, offered extra-fine California pears.

The California fruit had become



BAST'S REAL ESTATE ATLAS OF SURVEYS OF WASHINGTON, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, COMPLETE IN THREE VOLUMES, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS





COURTESY OF THE B&O RAILROAD MUSEUM

**Loading Ice into Refrigerator Cars, ca. 1930** Laborers loading ice into refrigerator cars, probably in Georgia.

available to the East Coast with completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. Florida's farmers had been selling fruit to northerners for a few decades, in small quantities, but could not fully exploit their agricultural potential until the state got its own rail net and secured connections with northern cities after the Civil War. Time was needed to build the transport infrastructure, so the Florida oranges of 1875 were not necessarily coming to DC by rail for their entire trip.

**Refrigerator Car, ca. 1910** Insulated boxcars chilled with ice became common during the last few decades of the 19th century and enabled food processors and farmers to send fruit, meat, and produce to distant markets without fear of spoilage.

Ten years later the national fruit trade was operating on a large scale for the mass market. "When oranges are plentiful, as they are just now," a prominent District fruit dealer explained to a *Washington Post* reporter in 1884, "there are about 500 boxes, of 200 average-size oranges each, sold in this city weekly" — 100,000 oranges per



COURTESY OF THE B&O RAILROAD MUSEUM



COURTESY OF THE B&O RAILROAD MUSEUM

**Poultry Car, ca.1900** Cars for live poultry, like those for livestock, were sheathed in wooden slats to provide ventilation.



COURTESY OF THE B&O RAILROAD MUSEUM

**Kerosene Heaters for Banana Cars** Bananas from the Caribbean became a major food item for shippers during the second half of the 19th century. The fruit was sent to New York City or Baltimore by ship and then distributed by rail to towns along the East Coast. Bananas were transported green and kept warm until they reached their destination, where they were ripened in special warehouses before being sold to wholesalers. In cold weather the railroads warmed the boxcars of bananas with kerosene heaters.





#### A Meat Factory

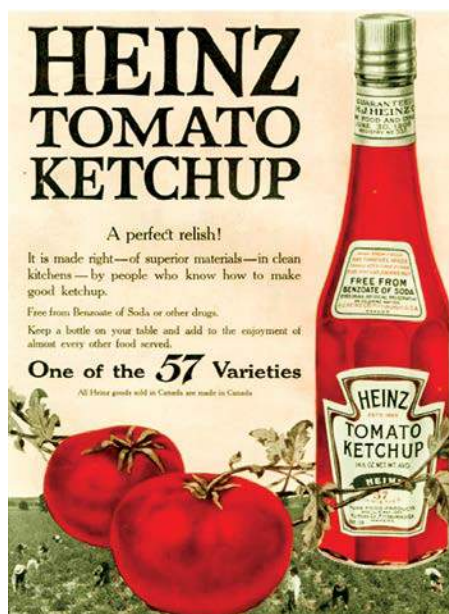
Cutting up hogs at Swift & Co.'s Packing House, Chicago, ca. 1905. The division of butchering tasks enabled food processors to realize great economies of scale and improvements in the speed of transforming animals into meat.

week. The dealer explained that there was practically no end to the supply because of the overlapping seasons of domestic and imported varieties — beginning with Italian oranges in early December, Spanish oranges in summer, and Florida oranges in autumn. It was a new take on the old notion of seasonality. And the oranges were cheap, sold on the streets for 15-20 cents a dozen.

The growing size of the fruit trade

#### A Factory-Made Condiment

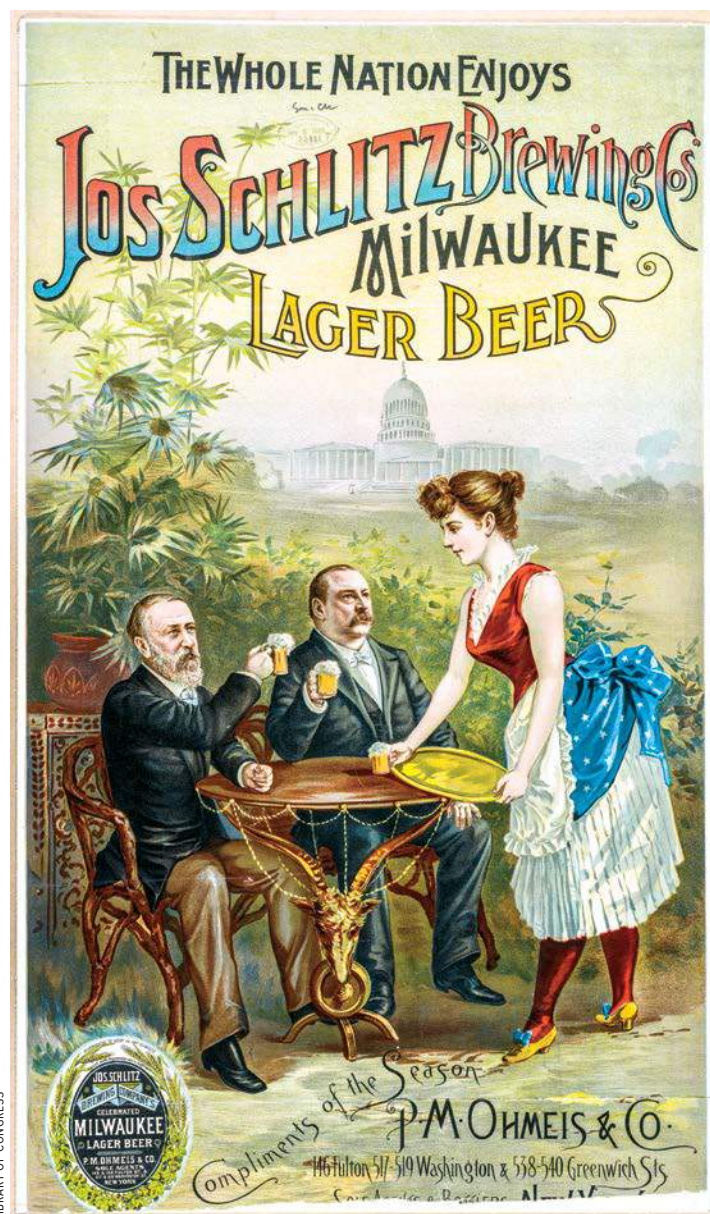
Advertisement from 1910 for a factory-made product once commonly prepared at home. Recipes for ketchups, or catsups, abound in early American cookbooks, including Mary Randolph's published in DC in 1824.



PINTEREST

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

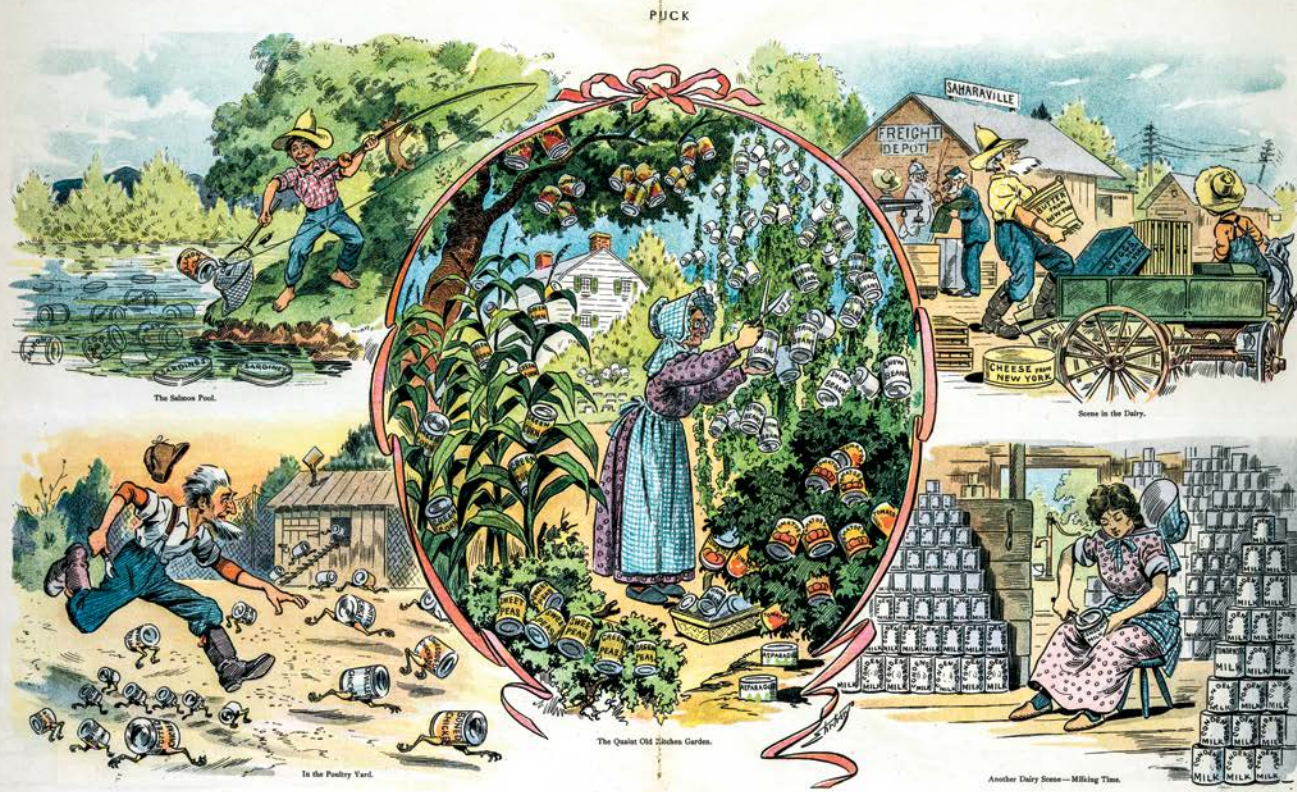
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



tempted local growers in the DC metro area to enlarge their orchards in hopes of capturing some of the business. Beginning early in the 1870s, while the B&P and the B&O were building their Washington rail nets, growers in Maryland and Virginia went on a buying spree at local tree nurseries. What they failed to do was make arrangements for transporting their crop to the large centers of consumption, cities like New York or Philadelphia. A local grower who had watched the expansion of the orchards wrote a letter to the editor of the *Evening Star* in which he criticized the growers for failing to line up contracts with the railroads.

**Factory Beer** Advertisement, ca. 1888, for the Schlitz Brewing Company, based in Milwaukee. Schlitz, which was soon to become the world's largest brewer, had at least two warehouses in Washington, DC, though possibly not at the same time. One, attested in 1889, was in Southeast, on the B&P Railroad tracks near Garfield Park, and the other, dating from the turn of the century, was along the Metropolitan Branch of the B&O Railroad in Eckington.





### Country Food Transformed, 1906

"What we get to eat in the country," by S.D. Ehrhart, 1906, a cartoon spoofing the ubiquity of canned foods. It shows a country woman harvesting canned fruits and vegetables from the kitchen garden, a boy catching canned salmon, a man trying to catch running cans of chicken, a man loading a wagon with food products from New York City, and a milkmaid opening a can of condensed milk.

As a result of the lack of rail transport, wrote "Pomegranate," the abundant fruit crop was literally rotting in the wagons of the growers. His message was that the surrounding farm land needed only good transport to establish a prosperous fruit business. "First, seek ye the markets and the transportation to them, and at cheap rates, then cover this country with orchards, vineyards and fruit gardens. A word to the wise is sufficient."

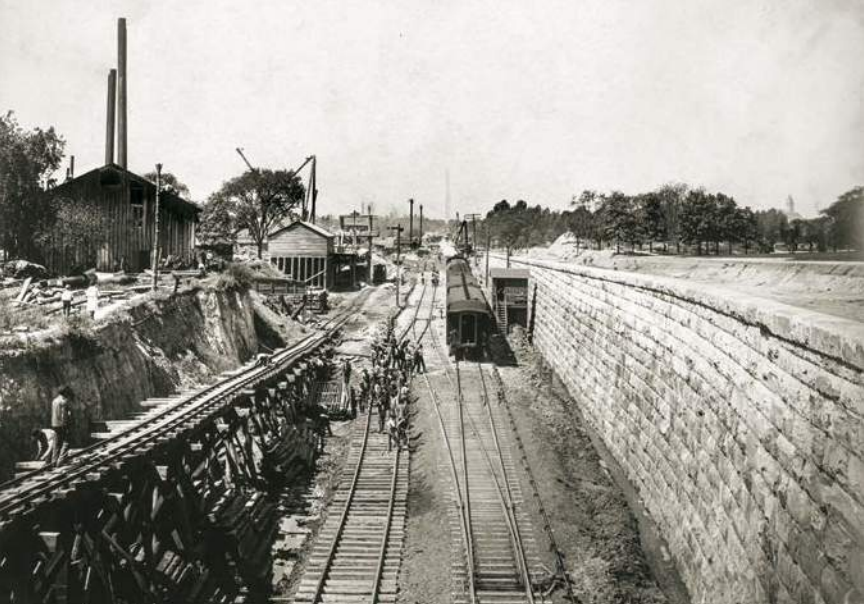
### Decline of Local Sourcing

**THAT IS NOT WHAT** happened. Instead, the metro area's small farms, many located along the Anacostia River, continued to provide some fruit but mostly vegetables for the District's residents. During the summer season they raised berries, beets, cabbage, cantaloupes, cauliflower, celery, parsnips, potatoes, tomatoes,

and watermelons. However, they found that competition from produce brought from the South kept prices excessively low during the summer, so they compensated during the cold months by hothouse-raising celery, lettuce, parsley, tomatoes, and other vegetables. "In winter we get \$1 a dozen for celery, and we are glad to get 25 cents for a bushel basket during the summer season," a grower explained to a reporter in 1889.

The city's small growers had experienced the power of rail transportation in a personal and tangible manner, but they saw a niche and exploited it. Even that niche would disappear in time, however, as the city built on most of its farm land and as consumer tastes continued to move toward factory food sold by national processors. If the local fruit growers had taken Pomegranate's advice, a decade before, they might have





LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

#### Construction at West End of Virginia Avenue Tunnel, ca. 1904

The federal mandate to remove all of Washington's railroad tracks from grade level meant that the Virginia Avenue rail tunnel was extended to the west. If the buildings on the left are part of the B&P Railroad's Garfield Park yard, the open space on the extreme right would be Garfield Park. The clock tower of the B&P's passenger depot appears just above the tree line on the extreme right.

enjoyed a brief spurt of prosperity, only to be clobbered by the fruit goliaths of California and Florida, just as the city's produce farmers were undercut by the Southern growers.

The local and regional produce and livestock trade of prewar days had become a national trade. Before the Civil War, steamboats and railroads were important adjuncts to local production in cities like Baltimore and Washington, but homegrown fruit and vegetables, and poultry and hogs, probably formed the bulk of urban diets. After the war the railroads became capable of supplying most of a city's needs year-round if necessary, making local agriculture largely an adjunct of the national food web.

One of the boosters of the new food scene was Artemas Ward (1848-1925), who entered the grocery business during the 1870s. In his massive *Encyclopedia of Foods and Beverages*, published in New York in 1911, he often compared the advanced and enlightened state of food affairs with the situation decades before. The asparagus, he remarked, was once a seasonal treat of the affluent but was now available to all classes of the population at all times of the year. The national fruit trade had done away with seasonality, he claimed, and by doing so had altered how Americans measured the annual calendar.

Ward's comments on the meat trade are especially notable for their relevance

to Washington. "In no one thing has the general consumer gained over his predecessors more than in the matter of fresh meats. It is not so many years ago that residents in small towns and country districts were dependent for fresh meat on an uncertain and fluctuating supply from the occasional or periodic slaughtering of one or two animals by local butchers — the result being that dried or salted meats were the mainstay of a large percentage of the population." Henry Unwin Addington could attest to the truth of that assertion. "To-day," Ward continued, "owing to the many improvements in transportation, the invention of refrigerator-cars and other commercial developments, fresh meat can be obtained all the year round even in the most remote sections."

DC's residents seem to have welcomed the changes, which were profound for daily life. Washington's newspapers at the turn of the century offered ever increasing amounts of advertising showing that the District was awash in the foods of the world. Ward and his colleagues had won the consumer's heart. Whether their products were really better than those of the old days — with greater and more consistent quality and less adulteration — is hard to say, but in the postwar years, an era of national growth and excess, the most important fact was perhaps that Washingtonians finally had a diet worthy of a great nation's capital. They could eat as well as any American, even if they couldn't vote. 🍎

Text by William Zeisel, QED Associates LLC.  
Design by AURAS Design, Inc. Printed in 2017. This publication was done under the auspices of the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly ([www.swdc.org](http://www.swdc.org)) and with support from the DC Preservation League's Preservation Initiatives Grant. This material is based upon work supported in part by a grant from the DC Preservation League ([www.dcpreservation.org](http://www.dcpreservation.org)). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the DC Preservation League.





# HOW THE RAILROAD CHANGED FOOD & DIET IN WASHINGTON DC

SOUTHWEST  
NEIGHBORHOOD  
ASSEMBLY

[swdc.org](http://swdc.org)

PO Box 70131

Washington, DC 20024

